

Preston Hollow Presbyterian Church
Listen!
Samuel 3:1-10
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For those of us who still use telephones and land-lines, then is nothing, quite so compelling as the phone ringing in the middle of the night. Nothing wakes us up thoroughly, commands full attention than the telephone by your bedside ringing at 2:30 a.m. By the way, after I had written this I happened to be with three granddaughters. We were having lunch and as we were leaving I said to the youngest, Lilly, age 8, "Lilly, don't forget your telephone" that was lying beside her plate. Lilly said, "Granddaddy, that's not a telephone—that's just a phone!" And then she rubbed it in, "Daddy, Granddaddy called it a telephone." I didn't know. They and lots like them –do not have a land line and telephones. I'll bet you didn't know either. Now we all do. So—back in the dark ages, when people talked to one another on the telephone, there was nothing quite so urgent and compelling and loud as one of them ringing in the middle of the night.

For parents of teenagers, physicians, volunteer fire fighters, and ministers, the phone ringing in the middle-of-the-night means someone is in trouble. It's rarely good news at 2:30 a.m.

In a commentary on the story of Samuel and old Eli, Professor Paul Kleim, makes the now common observations that cellular technology has resulted in our being "on call" twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. It has also resulted in some peculiar behavior: people talking while walking down the street, on buses, in airplane waiting areas, full voice, annoying to everyone around, information nobody wants. Hands-free technology, while safer, exacerbates—now you can walk down the sidewalk having an intimate conversation, looking for all the world as if you are talking to yourself (which, by the way, I have concluded is really what is going on). And—it is everywhere—concert halls, theaters, churches— people trying to talk.

In the midst of all this calling, Professor Kleim asks, "How do we recognize the voice of God calling us?" [Living by the Word, p 22-23 Christian Century] It is the subject of one of our oldest and best stories. I love this story: its nuances and ambiguity. I love the way God is trying to get through to Samuel, calls Samuel in the middle of the night, 1,2,3,4 times and Samuel doesn't recognize who is calling. I confess I love the exchange between old Eli and young Samuel because it sounds so familiar. If you have or had, young children, or had grandchildren stay overnight, sooner or later it happens: you're fast asleep and all of a sudden you become aware of someone standing by your bedside, "I can't sleep," the child says. "I had a bad dream" or "there's a monster in the closet" or "I think I hear a voice." And you pretty much said exactly what old Eli said, "There is no monster, no

voice; get a drink of water and go back to sleep.” And if it happened three times, who wouldn’t say what Eli said, “All right. Go lie down and if it happens again, say: Speak—I’m listening.”?

This is all happening back on the edge of history. Israel is evolving from a loose federation of tribes into a primitive nation. Eli is a priest who presides at a shrine, a sacred place, where sacrifices are made, incense burned and prayers said. Samuel’s parents, Hannah and Elkanah, are getting on in years, have given up having children and then, as happens elsewhere in scripture, Hannah turns up pregnant. In gratitude they name their son Samuel and present him to God at Eli’s shrine. Samuel becomes Eli’s helper because Eli himself is getting on in years and doesn’t hear very well.

And the bigger story here is God calling and choosing someone outside the normal channels, someone unlikely, in this case, a very young one to do God’s work. Samuel will become Israel’s first great prophet. Samuel will anoint Israel’s first king, King Saul. It is an interesting and provocative and not always comfortable insight into the way God goes about getting the work of the Kingdom done. The powerful motion picture *Selma* reminds us that Martin Luther King, an ordained minister with a Ph.D. from Boston University had to work outside normal channels: the courts, legislature, established and influential churches. When he led demonstrations and was arrested in Birmingham minister of large, influential white churches asked King to stop pushing so hard, to be patient and let things progress gradually. King wrote a letter to the white clergy of Birmingham, *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, that has become an American classic. He reminded his brother clergy that the early Christians were called “outside agitators” when they protested the appalling Roman practice of infanticide: “disturbing the peace” when they breached the conventional, traditional barriers of class and gender, rich and poor, slave and free. God, this old story suggests, first tries appropriate channels to get this done, and if people won’t listen, God goes outside, chooses a young Samuel, a young prophet by the name of Martin Luther King, to overturn centuries of injustice.

“Listen,” old Eli told Samuel. “Be quiet. Stop fussing and talking so much, and listen.” The greatest gift we can give to another person is to pay attention, attend to, listen. The greatest gift we can give to another person is to listen with full attention, listen without interrupting. Did you ever notice how instead of listening, we begin to think and plan what we are going to say in response to what another is saying? Listening—is the essential element in communication—and it holds within it the possibility of healing, redemption, communion, between husbands and wives, partners and lovers, dear friends. Listening in work places, to colleagues, supervisors, bosses, employees. Listen over coffee or shared meals. Put the newspaper down, shut off the cell phone, close the iPad and listen. It is

particularly important when the topic is controversial and people have different opinions and come to different conclusions.

In the midst of church fights over sexual orientation and ordination, reproductive rights, Christology, Theology, authority of Scripture—in the midst of which things get pretty hot, sometimes accusations are made and, as you know, sometimes people conclude that we can't stay together any longer. I like to keep in mind something one of the saints of the Presbyterian Church, a generation ago, Hugh T. Kerr, said one time. It was in the midst of the Vietnam War when church people were deeply divided. Kerr observed that people really don't want to communicate. "Dialogue is difficult because opposing factions stop listening and tune each other out. Conversations end in a shouting match, fewer and fewer are in the mood for listening and hearing." [Our Life in God's Light p 137]

Everyone need someone who will listen, who will say you are important enough to me, that I will set aside my agenda for a moment in order to attend to you. People pay a lot of money to find someone who will listen. They used to require courses in seminary known affectionately as "Shut Up and Listen" courses. A minister's natural instinct is to talk and keep talking, to explain, clarify, convince and dispense advice. Most of us need to learn that what people need from us is not more talk, not even good advice, but the opportunity to be heard. Good physicians know that and spend valuable time asking questions and carefully listening.

Wouldn't the world be a better, healthier, and safer place if nations and cultures listened to one another instead of a War of Civilizations, as Samuel Huntington called it? Wouldn't it be a better world if Christians, Jews and Muslims listened to one another? There is probably no listening to be done to extremists who have already shut done intellectually and who kill innocent people in the midst of mindless, ideological rage. But there is more work to be done, nevertheless, between Christians and Muslims and Jews, internationally, nationally and in every community in America.

In Germany, in the 1930's, Dietrich Bonhoeffer took his stand publicly in opposition to Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party. As you know, he was martyred at the end of the war for his part in the attempt to assassinate Hitler. What you may not know is that he organized and led an underground seminary at Finkenwold for theological students who shared his commitment to resist the Nazis. For obvious reasons students lived in a close knit, tight, almost secret community—not easy in any circumstance. The health of the community was literally a matter of life and death. Out of that experience Bonhoeffer wrote a little book, Life Together. One of the sections is entitled "The Ministry of Listening." He wrote:

"The first service one owes to others in the fellowship consists in listening. Just as love to God begins with listening to his Word, so the

beginning of love for the brethren is learning to listen to them. It is God's love for us that He not only give us His Word, but also lends us His ear."

Bonhoeffer noted that "Christians, particularly ministers, so often think that they must always contribute something when they are in the company of others—they forget that listening can be a greater service than speaking." [p98]

It was maybe the smartest thing the old priest ever said, the best priestly advice he ever gave—Listen. I believe God does call us, you and me. I believe the voice of God comes to us in the world—in the beauty of a sunset, the power of a storm, a newborn's first cry, telling us that creation is good and precious and a gift given to us each morning, calls us to gratitude and praise. And I believe the voice of God comes to us through the voices of others; the poor, the oppressed, the marginalized, the children—the voice of God summoning us to be faithful and obedient and kind and just and compassionate and generous. And I believe God speaks to us in great art and beautiful music and noble causes like Civil Rights and peace, like an end to hunger and education and an opportunity for all the children. I believe God is calling when we feel a tug at our hearts, when impatience wells up and summons to get up and do something and participate and sacrifice. And, as a Christian, I believe God speaks and continues to speak through Jesus Christ, God's Word made flesh. He is God's Word, God's voice, spoken clearly and powerfully: in his birth and life and teaching, his kindness and compassion, his inclusive, unconditional love for all humankind. I believe God calls you and me, in Jesus Christ, to lives of faithful discipleship.

I love the reminder that it takes God four times to get through to Samuel: to persuade Samuel to listen.

In George Bernard Shaw's play on the life of Joan of Arc, there is a scene in which the Archbishop and King Charles are interrogating her. The Archbishop asks, "How do you know you are right?"

Joan answers, "My voices."

King Charles interrupts, "Oh your voices, your voices. Why don't the voices come to me? I'm the King, not you."

Joan responds, " They do come—but you do not hear them."

It is an important thing—a singularly important word old Eli says to Samuel.

Listen.

Amen.